

## **UNEQUAL TESTAMENTS: THE SOURCE OF NEW TESTAMENT AUTHORITY**

by Ian Hodge, Ph.D.

Living with a Reformed Baptist family, as I did for some time, gave me the opportunity to exercise some discussion on the topic of baptism. In that discussion it has become increasingly clear to me why Reformed Theology in general and Christian Reconstruction in particular are not *really* winning the intellectual war. They certainly win some of the skirmishes, but the war itself is far from over. And it will remain so until the unassailable Word of God is brought to bear on the enemy. Here's the problem.

In my discussions with my host it was evident that he relied completely on a New Testament theology. No matter how many times I tried to get the discussion going from the Old Testament, my host would say words like, "That's fine, but the New Testament says . . ." And off he would go quoting the New Testament.

As I thought about this, I realized something that had not been so clear before. It was the willingness of my host to hold not just to the Bible in general, but to the idea in particular that irrespective of what might be taught in the Old Testament, the New Testament now offered a "correction" to the older Testament. By "correction" I mean it has somehow eliminated or altered a teaching in the Old Testament. In the words of Jaroslav Pelikan, "Christians are accustomed to speak of 'the Old Testament' and 'the New Testament,' the contrast between 'the old' and 'the new' unavoidably carrying with it connotations such as 'the superseded' or at least 'the updated.'" (*Whose Bible Is It?* 2005, p. 5.) Lightfoot was not hesitant in declaring that "God made two significant covenants with his people and that the New Covenant has displaced the Old" (*How We Got The Bible*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 2003, p. 25).

This got me thinking.

If you think this way of arguing from the Bible is limited to Reformed Baptists, or even any other kind of Baptist, consider this. Why don't Christians generally uphold the dietary laws today? Because they believe that the New Testament somewhere and somehow changes the Old Testament teaching so that the dietary laws are no longer binding on Christians. Now this view is strong in Reformed and other circles. But a

little reflection will show that the same hermeneutic as my Reformed Baptist friends is used. The New Testament somehow makes a change to the Old Testament.

What is evident in Christian circles, even in Reformed circles, is that this idea of my landlord is the commonly accepted approach in determining theology. Consider this. The Old Testament says children should be given the covenant sign, circumcision. Most Christians agree the New Testament changes this sign to baptism. For Baptists, however, the New Testament offers a further “corrective” to this idea. Those with a Baptist perspective believe that the New Testament restricts the covenant sign to older believers and it should also be applied to females.

It is not just these two issues, however, that indicate a problem. Most Christians agree that the book of Hebrews offers a replacement to the Old Testament teaching on the ceremonial law.

To put this another way, everyone seems to be in agreement that when the Old Testament says one thing and the New Testament allegedly says something else, then the New Testament is to be taken as the *superior* authority. It is easy to see that of the two testaments, the New Testament holds a *priority* over whatever the Old Testament might have taught on these things or anything else for that matter. They can hardly be said to be of equal authority.

Apply the logic and you can soon see how easy it is to argue that *none* of the Old Testament is binding today unless the New Testament says otherwise. Sound familiar? It should, for in Christian circles today, many people are united on this single point: the New Testament supercedes the Old Testament and replaces it with new teaching. That is how many people perceive it and argue their theology.

#### *An Alternative View*

But, instead of offering a “corrective” to the Old Testament, what if we insist that the Bible – the Old and the New Testaments – tells a single story; that God does not tell us one thing in the Old, then change it in the New. He does not do this on baptism, he does not do it on the idea of salvation, and just maybe He didn’t do it on the eating of pork either. We’ll come back and revisit this and the ceremonial laws a little later.

Consider this. We believe in our theology that the Bible (the two testaments) is the Word of God. If anyone proposed a document to be added to the Bible, Christians would insist that the new document should be looked at in the light of the two testaments and determined, on that basis, if the new document meets the test of consistency. In other words, the Bible is the Word of God and to be used to determine right or wrong, truth or error, fact or fiction. The Bible, consisting of 66 books, is the canon, the rule for life. Christians almost everywhere agree this is the right approach.

But what would the modern Christians have done if they lived in the first century B.C.? If they were consistent, they would insist on the same methodology, that the Scriptures (the Word of God) as it was then known, was the standard to be used. (In saying this, I am aware of the issues concerning the formation of the canon. The Old Testament canon as we have it today did not exist in the first century B.C. In fact, it did not even exist in the first century A.D. As Craig Evans observes, “When the NT authors were at work (not knowing, by the way, that what they were writing would ever become a ‘New Testament’), there was no finalized canon of Scripture.” (*From Prophecy to Testament*, Craig A. Evans, Ed., p.3. See also *A High View of Scripture?*, by Craig D. Allert, *The Canon of Scripture* by F.F. Bruce, or *The Biblical Canon*, by Lee M. McDonald.) While there was no canon as we know it, there were certainly writings – Scripture it was often referred to – that provided authority on religious matters. The Messiah used this Scripture effectively in his arguments with the Scribes and Pharisees.

Thus, when a little-known carpenter from Nazareth appeared on the scene and made some claims about himself, what standard should the people of that day have used to assess the claims? Jesus answered this question for them. If you rightly understood the law and the prophets, he said, you would know who I am (see, for example, Luke 24:44).

And when Jesus threw the money changers out of the temple, the religious leaders of the day tried to challenge His authority to be in the temple cleansing it in this way. After all, the temple was reserved for those lawfully ordained as priests. By referring to his baptism by John, Jesus cleverly indicated his authority was in fact priestly, for he had been baptized by a priest who was the son of a priest, and so the chain goes back centuries (Matt. 21:12-27).

On another occasion the Pharisees again tried to prove that Jesus did not meet the standards of the Hebrew Scriptures as they understood them. They went and got an adulterous woman to see what Jesus would do with her. In response, He wrote in the sand something which left them without the ability to accuse Jesus of departing from the Old Testament (John 8:1ff) and without the ability to bear testimony against this alleged adulteress. If Jesus had changed the Hebrew Scriptures in any way, the Pharisees would have won the argument they had with Jesus. They had attempted to show that Jesus was not the one whom the Scriptures had foretold. But on every occasion Jesus showed that he *was* the one, and that it was the Pharisaical misinterpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures that were the problem (Matt. 5:21ff).

This is the lesson that St. Paul learned on the road to Damascus. The misunderstandings of his earlier teachings had led him to persecute Christians. But when rightly understood, the Hebrew Scriptures became the basis for his “new” theology, as he argues so often in his writings.

Move into the Christian era, when it became necessary to determine which documents would be canonized, what standard was used? Was it the Hebrew Scriptures as they existed at that time? If not, then there is *some other standard* by which the New Testament canon was determined. For some, this might be the Holy Spirit mysteriously bearing witness, somehow, to the individual’s conscience that this particular writing is canon. This is often called mysticism, for obvious reasons. For others, it might be the apostolic origin of the writings. What we need to know is which of these choices – or perhaps there are other methods to select from – is the *right* choice as a way of determining the canon, and why this way is correct and all others are wrong. And perhaps there might be multiple choices.

Since the first century church had no New Testament as we know it, how did the people at this time see their Scriptures and authority? In his discussion on the formation of the New Testament canon, Allert observes that “In Clement, Jesus’s words are afforded the same level of authority as those of the prophets. . . . So, rather than invoking the authority of the a New Testament document, Clement invokes the authority of the oral tradition *as receiving ultimate authority in the Old Testament*” (p. 110, emphasis added). On Ignatius of Antioch, Allert says, “Ignatius nowhere quotes the Gospels in a way that would indicate they were authoritative Scripture. Authority for him was found in the apostolic preaching of the gospel and in the Old Testament” (p. 111).

This should not be surprising. The message of the day was “the Kingdom of God is at hand.” In other words, this is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. It was not a new religion, even a new one based on changes to an older one. It was the final and comprehensive fulfillment of the Old Testament. And Jesus was absolutely correct in pointing out if people properly understood the Hebrew Scriptures, they would know who He was. He was, after all, the fulfillment of all the Old Testament expectations. And the expectations were not for changes to the Old Covenant but its fulfillment with the arrival of the Messiah.

What is surprising is that somewhere along the way the Old Testament got dropped as the standard for determining the New Testament canon. Allert, for example, lists the criteria of NT canonicity as Apostolicity, Orthodoxy, Catholicity and Widespread Use (pp. 52-60). Interestingly, he says Orthodoxy is measured against “the apostolic faith.” Which begs the questions, what is the apostolic faith and what standard determines if it is the right faith?

So the right thing for people to do at that time was in fact an application of *sola Scriptura*. Pick up the Hebrew Scriptures and test everything by it. Anything that does not conform to its teaching ought to be abandoned – and it was.

If we want to hold to the idea of *sola Scriptura* and insist on the written revelation of God as the final authority in all things, then either we must admit this was the right thing to do in the first century B.C., the first century A.D., and every century before and after these or else come up with some other *sola*.

If the Hebrew Scriptures are the standard for determining New Testament documents, however, then any document which disagreed with these Scriptures would, by definition, be ruled out. It does not meet the standard. Any document that did not teach the truths of the first three chapters of Genesis, for example, would be considered wrong. So would any other document which disagreed with *any part* of the Hebrew Scriptures, even those portions on diet and ceremonial laws.

### *An Inescapable Problem*

This issue is not so easy to dismiss, for there is an example for us today that requires a theological solution. It is the textual issues raised in Mark 7:19 concerning the dietary laws. Did Jesus declare all foods clean, thereby

changing the dietary laws? Consider this. The phrase “Thus he declared all foods clean” does not appear, for example, in the King James Version, because it was not in the Greek text that was used for that translation. In other words, there are textual issues that arise concerning this verse and its apparent teaching. This closing phrase in Mark’s gospel only occurs in later revisions of the Greek text.

How, then, will we know which is the right version? This is the challenge. How did people in the fourth century know which was the right version to declare it canon? What standard do scholars use when they attempted to figure out which were the right manuscripts? What standard *should* they use?

It is easy to see that the Hebrew Scriptures were the *original* word of God. That being the case, it must be the standard to be used in determining New Testament documents and therefore the theology in those documents. If this is not the way to solve the issue, then clearly there is another authority other than the Hebrew Scriptures behind the New Testament.

In saying this I am aware of the development of the authority of the Old Testament. Is it possible that the New Testament developed its authority along the same lines? Jesus and the disciples were recognized as being God’s spokes people, just as the Old Testament prophets were. Therefore, whatever they said was considered to be the word of God.

That argument might have some weight if it were not for Jesus’s words himself. He did not come to abolish but to fulfill the Old Testament. And herein lies the narrower range of this issue. It is only in *some* of the words of St. Paul, and *possibly* the book of Hebrews, that there is debate over the abiding validity of the Old Testament. Given St. Paul’s statement in Rom. 3:31, that his previous comments do not in any way do away with the Old Testament law, it is stretching his comments elsewhere to say that he contradicted himself at a different time.

There’s more, however. None of the Old Testament prophets made changes to any other part of the Hebrew Scriptures. It was this internal consistency in the message that helped give recognition to the prophetic status of the Old Testament prophets. By applying this same principle, we see how the Old Testament would still be the standard to determine the New Testament writers as being God’s spokespersons.

And we see this evidence time and time again in the New Testament, where Paul, for example, continually quotes the Old Testament in a way to show that his teaching was in conformity to, and the fulfillment of, the Hebrew Scriptures. So did the author of the book of Hebrews.

### *Is the New Testament the Problem?*

On the other hand, the problem might not be with the document themselves. Perhaps there are *interpretations* of the documents that attempt to make the New Testament disagree with the Old Testament in some way. Unfortunately, these interpretations are helped along by manuscript variant issues that no one seems willing to resolve. How do we know what is the correct textual version of Mark 7:19? The average lay Christian does not know how to answer this question, so he continually reads in his modern translation “thus Jesus declared all food clean” and soon he begins to believe it because “it is in the Bible.”

But until there is an answer to the question of *how* will the correct textual variant be determined, we won't know the answer with certainty. And the only possibly consistent answer is that the Old Testament itself must determine the correctness of New Testament issues. In this instance, it will be important to deal with another issue, and that is which manuscripts were selected as canon in the formation of the New Testament. Not only are the manuscripts important, but by the same standard, it would be necessary to insist that the *interpretation* is wrong if it does not match the teachings of the Old Testament.

Now do you see the issue? What *is* the authority that we hold to as Christians? Is it the Old *and* New Testaments? The testaments cannot be *equal* if we accept that the New Testament somehow corrects, alters, replaces or supercedes Old Testament teaching.

The authority of the Old Testament and its right interpretation were the topic of great debate between Jesus and the Pharisees and between St. Paul and the Pharisees. Many people now seem to accept the Pharisaical principle: that the Old Testament taught that a person can be saved by keeping the law. This is the idea behind modern Dispensationalism and many strands of Christian thought.

But is it necessary to think like this? Only if we insist on eggs *and* bacon for breakfast. For there is another way that keeps everything intact. It is this.

We can, rather, insist on the total unity of the two testaments. We can insist that God never did have a plan of works salvation, for even in the Old Testament people were saved by faith. And if they were saved in the same way as New Testament Christians, why was the law given? Not to save them, that is for sure, although it is clear that they could not be saved without keeping the law. It must have had another purpose. And its purpose survives through both Old and New Testaments. This is very clearly what Jesus meant when he said he did not come to abolish one jot or tittle of the law, but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17). And it is also what St. Paul meant when he said that the law was not overthrown (Rom. 3:31).

If we turn to the book of Galatians there appears to be some problem in the church over the law. But the problem, says St. Paul is with those who want to make the law the necessary grounds of salvation. It could not be, he argues. The law was given 430 years after the promise to Abraham, and therefore could not annul that promise (Gal. 3:17, 18). The law is not contrary to the promises, he argues (v. 21), thus expressing the same thought we find in his letter to the Romans (3:31).

#### *Is John Calvin the Problem?*

Protestant reformer John Calvin had a significant influence in the development of Protestantism. A serious Bible student, his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, had a worldwide influence. They are still influential today, but in narrow Reformed circles.

Here's what Calvin had to say about the Old and New testaments. He wrote a chapter in his *Institutes*, "The Resemblance Between the Old and New Testaments" (Book 2, Ch. 10). He immediately followed this with Chapter 11: "The Difference Between the Two Testaments".

Here's the problem. Read John Calvin's chapter 10 heading again: "The Resemblance . . ." Stop there. Calvin chose his words carefully, that's what makes him a good writer. He was not willing that his idea of "resemblance" meant "complete resemblance or complete continuity".

And that is why he wrote chapter 11. The two testaments are not the same. There are differences in Calvin's mind, and he made those differences rather clear. Those differences are taken up, for example, in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, (VII:vi) where it speaks of "various dispensations" of the one covenant. Unlike later Dispensationalism, Calvin and the WCF see a better continuity between the two covenants. But they

are not willing to go for full continuity. And therein lies the major problem and the core of the issue before us.

But Calvin has much more to say to us yet on this topic. Not only does he see “differences”, but those differences are described to us in *Institutes*, (2:11:4).

“The Old is deadly, because it can do nothing but involve the whole human race in a curse; the New is the instrument of life, because those who are freed from the curse it restores to favour with God.”

Calvin is at one of his weakest moments in this chapter of Book 2, when he deals with the relationship between Old Testament and New Testament. Calvin does not mince his words. He is no milquetoast when it comes to disagreeing with those who do not agree with his viewpoint, as evidenced in his polemics against the Anabaptists and Libertines.

What is his viewpoint about the relationship of the Old and New Testaments in this section of his *Institutes*? There are several aspects to it, what he calls a “threefold antithesis” between OT and NT. First, he says, “the Old is literal” whereas the “New is spiritual”? Why is the OT literal? Because it is “promulgated without the efficacy of the Spirit.” The NT is spiritual because it is “engravened . . . on the heart” by God.

Now hold on there, John Calvin. Did I just read you right? Are you telling us that the Spirit — the Third Person of the Trinity — was not working in the Old Testament era? If so, please explain how Old Testament saints were saved? A Jewish theologian — a Pharisee, in fact — by the name of Saul, later changed to Paul, used an interesting argument in one of his letters when he gave the readers a history lesson. The law of God, he said, came 430 years after the promise. Therefore the law did not provide a new or alternative way of salvation. In fact, St. Paul directly links this Abrahamic promise to the present to argue that things have not changed from OT to NT when it comes to being saved.

Under Calvin’s view, the Old Testament saints were saved without the power of the Holy Spirit. By implication, the OT offered a different plan of salvation, and God changed that in the NT. But, as a song writer said on another occasion, “it ain’t necessarily so, the things that you’re liable to hear in the Bible, it ain’t necessarily so.” That song is from “Porgy and Bess”, an opera with music by George Gershwin, but I changed the original

word “read” to “hear”. What we read in the Bible is fine; some of the explanations we get are off the planet. And Calvin here is off the planet.

Second, in Calvin’s opinion, the Old Testament is “literal, deadly, temporal.” For Calvin, the Old Testament is the “ministry of condemnation” while the New Testament is the “ministry of righteousness.” Why? Because the New Testament is the way of salvation; the OT is not. While it seems the OT provides the backdrop for the NT, it was not until the Messiah died that people would be saved by grace. Again, this does not fit with what the Old Testament and New Testament has to say.

Third, Calvin calls this point the “Ceremonial Law” option. The Ceremonial Law was a shadow; with Christ, the shadow is made real. Therefore, it is no longer necessary to keep the Ceremonial Law.

But, the Ceremonial Law represented something. It was symbolic. Just as the Christian church today argues that the Lord’s Supper is symbolic, so too were the OT ceremonial laws.

Now just because they were symbolic, and the thing they symbolized has manifested itself, is this a necessary argument that says the symbols should be abolished? That’s simply begging the question. Just as the Lord’s Supper symbolizes something that has manifested itself, it would be an equally foolish argument to say that since the symbol is less than the reality, and that the reality should replace the symbol, therefore let’s abolish the Lord’s Supper. This argument of Calvin’s does not appear to understand symbolism and the place of symbolism in the Old Testament.

Finally, however, Calvin tries to retrieve himself somewhat. He realizes his argument is weak, so he tries to buffer it. He recognizes that there were OT saints. But he diminishes them in history. In comparison to the number of NT saints, there were so “few or none”, even though when compared to themselves they might have been many.

What’s the point of this, Calvin? What has the number of saints in the OT or the NT got to do with the assertion that the OT is “literal, deadly and . . .”. What was Calvin’s third point here? “Literal, deadly . . . and . . . temporary“. Wasn’t that the word you used Calvin? Speak up now.

Well, if it’s a temporary arrangement, what has the number of saints OT or NT got to do with it. This would be such an easy point to provide evidence.

Just quote some OT passage that infers that the OT arrangement was temporary, not permanent. That's all it takes. One or more passages of Scripture on which to base the argument. But Calvin is silent when it comes to Bible references. He doesn't even use one. Read Psalm 119 and find out why.

In this instance, Calvin's Institutes are not a polemic to prove a point. They are a dogmatic assertion of certain views that Calvin holds. Are his views right or wrong?

In Calvin at this point, we find arguments made popular in the second century. It is the Achilles Heel of current Christianity. I say current Christianity, because there is more than enough evidence remaining in our culture today that points to the Old Testament. Sabbatical years for college and university professors; 7-year bankruptcy discharge. The idea of local self-government, more prominent in the USA than Australia, has foundations in the Old Testament, as does the general political framework called "federalism" — even though it is quite broken at the present time. But the evidence is there.

Later in his *Institutes*, Calvin compounds his problem and made these comments about the Old Testament law and its place in the life of any nation in the New Testament period.

"For there are some who deny that any commonwealth is rightly framed which neglects the law of Moses, and is ruled by the common law of nations. How perilous and seditious these views are, let others see: for me it is enough to demonstrate that they are stupid and false" (Book IV, 20:14).

Calvin wrote at a time when it was common to speak clearly, unlike today where misleading and obfuscation are the order of the day. The idea that any commonwealth is to be ruled by the law of Moses is a "stupid and false" idea. Now Calvin is not completely denying the law of Moses, or is he?

"But if it is true that each nation has been left at liberty to enact the laws which it judges to be beneficial, still these are always to be tested by the rule of charity, so that while they vary in form, they must proceed on the same principle. Those barbarous and savage laws, for instance, which conferred honor on thieves, allowed the promiscuous intercourse of the sexes, and other things even fouler

and more absurd, I do not think entitled to be considered as laws, since they are not only altogether abhorrent to justice, but to humanity and civilized life” (*Ibid.*, IV;20:15).

In the very next section Calvin attempts to get morality back into the laws of nations. He does this with these words: “I do not think [they are] entitled to be considered as laws” because they are “abhorrent to justice” and “humanity and civilized life.” Having turned his back on the law of Moses, the Torah, Calvin offers in its place the standards of justice, humanity and civilized life.

But this only begs the question: How are we to know what the standards of justice, humanity and civilized life are unless they are defined by the law of God as given to Moses?

### *The Myth of Calvinism*

The answer to this question contains the myth of Calvinism. Now a myth is “a traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some being or hero or event, with or without a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation, esp. one that is concerned with deities or demigods and explains some practice, rite, or phenomenon of nature.”

Here’s the myth: the “well-known division which distributes the whole law of God, as promulgated by Moses, into the moral, the ceremonial, and the judicial law”.

Now Calvin provides no arguments as to how this division is arrived at, other than this one. “the ancients who adopted this division”.

In other words, somewhere in the past, presumably one or more of the church fathers, the tri-fold division of the law was created. Who precisely created this idea we are not told. Nor are we told why they created the division.

And there has yet to be a biblical argument which clearly indicates how the laws are to be divided. The Ten Commandments are supposed to be the moral laws, applicable to all, while all the other laws, civil and ceremonial are no longer to be applied, other than some kind of “general equity.”

But that argument — a myth — handed down through Calvin and later the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, has done nothing more than effectively

undercut the possibility of Christian culture. There is no determinable basis or fact to support the division of the law, then the putting aside of most of it. It is a myth. Christian culture, which imperfectly based itself on the Torah, came into existence, because some people did not believe the myth. Alfred the Great, for example.

There is no Christian or biblical culture without the Torah. And those who perpetuate the tri-fold division perpetuate a myth and undercut the possibility of restoring Christian — or if you prefer, Biblical — culture.

If you're not convinced, start reading the Psalms and the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:17ff. If those words in Scripture don't convince you, nothing will.

What is enigmatic in Calvin are his sermons and commentary on OT sections such as Deuteronomy, where he speaks favorably of many of the laws.

It seems that the real problem in Calvin is a disconnect between law and covenant. It's a disconnect that continues today and provides the backdrop to the present inability within Christianity to provide a comprehensive worldview that covers more than homosexuality, abortion and health care.

*Is The Westminster Confession of Faith the Problem?*

It is not easy to agree with the idea that there are somehow two dispensations of the one covenant, as taught in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (chapter VII:6). Underlying this language is a commitment to the idea that the New Testament replaces Old Testament teaching. Consider how the WCF treats "New Testament sacraments" and ignores those in the Old Testament. In the Larger Catechism, the question is asked, "What is a sacrament?" The very next question asks "Which are the New Testament sacraments." Was it an oversight that prohibited the framers of the WCF from asking "Which are the Old Testament sacraments?" Or was it a commitment to the idea that the Old Testament no longer needed to be followed in some areas?

The WCF clearly has a problem in XIX:4 when it claims the "sundry judicial laws . . . expired together with the state of Israel." Now it is evident that the writers of the WCF did not want to close the door completely on the Old Testament judicial laws, so they argued for the continuity of the "general equity" of the laws. But here's the problem. You cannot have a

“general equity” unless the law given to teach you the general principle is a valid law.

The WCF may be on stronger ground in XIX:3 when it argues that the ceremonial laws are abrogated under the New Testament. In order to carry this argument, however, appeal to the New Testament documents alone will not settle the case without raising the ultimate question: where does the New Testament get its authority to change the Old Testament?

*What About Daniel 9:27?*

There is only *one* reliable source to argue for changes from the Old Testament to the New Testament, and it is the Old Testament itself.

This leaves us to contemplate some possible contradictory interpretation of Daniel 9:27, when it prophetically says that the oblation and sacrifice will cease when Jesus comes. It seems, however, our reading of this passage also ought to be governed by other Old Testament indications on the law of God, and again we see that Psalm 119, for example, very clearly teaches the permanence of the laws, the statutes, the testimonies, and the precepts.

If a proper reading of Daniel 9:27 shows that this is a prediction of the end of the Old Testament sacrifices (plural) and offerings (plural), then there would be a case to allege that the New Testament changes to Old Testament law are valid and are, in fact, in harmony with the Old Testament. And if this is the case, then some scholarly homework needs to be done to now determine which of the sacrifices (all of them?) or which of the offerings (all of them?) are now abolished.

Here's the difficulty, however, with that argument. It seems that neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament give us the guiding principle whereby to determine *which* of the sacrifices and offerings are abolished. Consider that Malachi 3:8 declares that failure to pay *offerings* is robbing God. This makes tithing *and offerings* part of the *moral* law which, according to the WCF, is still binding. It appears the WCF is trying keep its cake and eat it too. In trying to separate moral from ceremonial and judicial laws, the WCF has run itself into some interesting paradoxes.

In short, there seem some inherent difficulties in trying to make changes to the Old Testament laws hang on one verse, Daniel 9:27. To maintain that this verse changes the Old Testament offerings is to argue that there are

now changes to the moral law, and the WCF does not seem to want to go this far.

### *Did the Roman Empire Change the Law?*

The history of Israel is one of pain and torment for them. The Old Testament describes this as consequence of their disobedience to God, their failure to live up to the promises of God.

In the years leading to 70 A.D. the Roman government became sufficiently tired of the Jews that it went to war against them. One of the results was the complete destruction of the Temple, the one that took them a long, long time to ever get into existence. The laws surrounding the Temple were suddenly impossible. What should be done?

There are many Christians today who use this as a reason why it is no longer necessary to keep the Old Testament laws – all of them. Now recognizing the problem is not necessarily the same thing as giving the issue the *authority* to dismantle the *whole* of the Old Testament law.

The fact is, there are many laws that are difficult to implement. Try today to implement the laws against usury. You won't get far in that direction. How about restoring Sabbath year and the year of Jubilee? Our culture outside the universities, many of which still practice the sabbatical, has no mechanism for taking one year off in seven, or of restoring property to its original owners every 50 years. And we haven't even gotten to the sacrificial and ceremonial laws, including the Temple and its use.

So we have a practical problem about keeping one or more of the OT laws. Let's abandon God's Old Testament law. That's the decision many seem to have made.

Of course, there is an alternative. Figure out a way to implement, first, those laws that are easy to start, then work progressively towards the more difficult ones. At least we'd make some progress.

### *Two Problems Resolved by the Two Testaments*

What is very clear from Scripture is this: that the Fall created two problems. When man determined to be his own god, deciding for himself what is right and wrong, the two problems were first, how to know what

truly is good and evil, right and wrong, truth and error, and second, how to restore the broken fellowship that now existed between man and God.

Now read the two testaments with this in mind. The Old Testament very clearly sets forth the standards of right and wrong. Man is not his own god, making up the categories of right and wrong. These are given to him by God in summary form in the Ten Commandments, and in detail in the case laws of the Old Testament.

Read the Old Testament from beginning to end. The first five books tell the story of the fall of man, and God's plan of redemption, culminating in the coming of the Messiah. The laws explain how God wants people to live. The rest of the Old Testament recounts Israel's many failures, and the prophets whom God raised to call Israel back to faithfulness.

The longest chapter in the Bible, Psalm 119, is a song of praise to the law of God. It establishes not the temporary nature of the law, but its permanency (e.g. Psa. 119:152).

The New Testament picks up the second problem, man's broken relationship with God.

Sin must be atoned for since death is the only acceptable punishment for sin. We cannot do this ourselves, so Jesus bears our punishment in our place. When we understand this, we can see why the New Testament writers continually write against the idea that justification is by works. This was the Pharisaical misinterpretation of the Old Testament. Justification is by faith, but in saying this, says St. Paul, we do not in any way do away with the law (Rom 3:31).

In Galatians we see the same pattern. Paul is not saying the law has been abolished. What he is arguing against is the misinterpretations of the Old Testament that were prevalent, the idea that by keeping the law people could get right with God or that keeping certain Israelite practices, a person could earn their salvation. This is a wrong idea, says St. Paul, giving the Galatians a lesson in Old Testament history and theology. The law came 430 years after the promise and therefore could not annul the promise of faith, the grounds of justification (Gal. 3:1ff).

Sometimes it is argued that Acts 15 is an abolition of the Old Testament. But the first 11 verses of this chapter clearly indicate that the issue was one of salvation, of being saved by keeping the law. Some people were

teaching the necessity of Old Testament laws in order to be saved (v. 1). This passage is not a discussion on the Christian life and how it ought to be lived. Neither is it a discussion on the Old Testament law and on whether those laws ought to be kept. It is a discussion on the idea of salvation, and the place of the law in salvation. Was it a necessity, as the Judaizers claimed? Not so, say the apostles, the elders and the brethren. We never authorized them to say you must be circumcised (Acts 15:24).

It will be a danger to try to make too much out of Acts 15. For if this passage is only laying down the laws that need to be kept from now on, thereby omitting circumcision, the ceremonial laws, the sacrificial laws, then it also omits the laws on stealing, murder, lying, coveting and the Sabbath. Does this mean that it is now alright to steal, murder and covet? No one is seriously arguing this, but they *imply* it by trying to use this same passage as an abolition of other laws.

But if there is any doubt, read again Jesus's words in Matt. 5:17.

What gives many Christians a problem is the words in James, that a person is *not* saved by faith alone, *if* that faith is devoid of good works, i.e. keeping the law of God. See also Hebrews chapter 3 for an elaboration of this point. Somewhere along the way, the separation of belief and works has taken place, as if mere intellectual assent to some biblical propositions is enough to save us. Such a mistaken belief is what drives some very obvious misinterpretation of the Bible, including the difficulty in accepting the continuing authority of the Old Testament as equal to the authority of the New Testament.

What, then, about the ceremonial laws? Surely the book of Hebrews is a corrective to the Old Testament by suggesting we no longer keep those parts of the law? But is this really what Hebrews teaches?

Consider this. There is one plan of salvation from beginning to end. Old Testament saints were saved the same way that people are saved in the New Testament era, by the shed blood of Jesus. If this is true, then why were there sacrificial laws in the Old Testament? They could not have been substitutes for Christ, for if they were, then the Old Testament folk saved themselves by their own sacrifices. Yet within the framework of justification by faith, God instituted the ceremonial laws along with all the other laws. For what purpose? Get the right answer to that, and perhaps we might find that there are *no New Testament abolitions or alterations to Old Testament teaching*.

What is in the New Testament is the completion of the Old Testament. It's fulfillment, just as Jesus said it was (Matt. 5:17). And any attempt to abolish the law or the prophets in any way simply makes a nonsense out of Jesus's statement, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." Do you see Jesus's point? *He did not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets.* It's that simple.

But if it's that simple, why is it made so complicated? Here's the way to keep the Bible intact. Jesus did not come to oppose the Old Testament. St. Paul did not oppose Jesus or the Old Testament, and neither did any other apostle. And this was the faith that was handed to the early church, and from the early church enshrined in the documents that were eventually selected as New Testament canon. Read the Apostle's or Nicene Creeds. Not one part of them disagrees with the Old Testament or attempts to change any of its teaching.

#### *Adding to the Scripture*

There is a further reason to consider, and that is the teaching of the Old Testament itself in one of its key passages, Deut. 4:2. "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you make keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you." Thus spoke Moses.

It is an interesting fact, according to McDonald, that "All Scriptures after the Torah received their authority from the Torah and were always viewed in relation to it" (Lee McDonald, *The Biblical Canon*, p. 176). Now the Torah was the Law of God as found in the first five books of the Bible. And here we see a consistent pattern of scholarship:

- The Torah is the original standard
- Everything following was judged in relationship to it
- Jesus said he did not come to abolish the law
- And if people understood the law and the prophets, they would understand Jesus.
- Jesus agreed with the Torah
- The Apostle Paul followed Jesus and he never disagreed with the Torah The other apostolic writers also followed Jesus
- No one EVER added anything -- or subtracted anything -- from the Old Testament.

- And the writer of Revelation, for good measure, added the reminder about adding or subtracting from the Word of God (Rev. 22:18ff)

Do you see now why it is not possible for interpretations that dismiss the Old Testament law or any part of it? Do you see now the consistency there is between the two testaments? They are not unequal. *If anything, the Old Testament is superior to the New, for it provides the defining and governing principles for everything that follows.*

*By What Standard?*

Do the New Testament documents really change Old Testament teachings? Perhaps the real problem is that we have adopted some ideas about the New Testament that are wrong. Perhaps it is not the New Testament that disagrees with parts of the Old Testament but our own misunderstandings first, of the Old Testament, and secondly of the New Testament.

The approach suggested here keeps the Old and New Testaments on equal footing. Any other idea somehow suggests that the New Testament is superior to the Old and should be read in preference to anything the Old Testament might say. This is not a doctrine of *whole Bible authority* but rather one of New Testament alone.

If the arguments presented here are on the right path, then we can see the problem in contemporary Christianity and why the Reformed theologians cannot really correct it. Unless the New Testament documents derive their authority from the Old Testament, then we are saying they get their authority from somewhere else, e.g. the Holy Spirit. And this, of course, is where 21<sup>st</sup> century Christianity is located. It is Spirit authority rather than Word authority that drives much of modern Christianity. Yet such a belief takes us close to the Montanist teachings of the second century that were declared to be in error by the church fathers.

The debate over canon received a renewed interest at the time of the Reformation. What books did constitute the real Bible? Luther did not like the book of James, for example. He also had trouble accepting the book of Esther. According to F.F. Bruce, Luther's "guidance in matters of the canon was derived not from tradition but from the gospel" (*The Canon of Scripture*, p. 102). Was Luther right in accepting the gospel as the standard for canonicity? Perhaps all he does is beg the question, and leave it unanswered. Why the gospel? Why not something else?

We do not need assertions on this matter. We need to know what God says on the topic. And He has given us, first, the Old Testament. This is the standard. And then he gave us a second standard to support and complete – not replace – and first. Thus the two testaments must carry equal authority or there is no biblical authority at all.

### *The Doctrine of God*

At the heart of the debate over the canon is a debate about God. Since the first Council of Nicaea, A.D. 325, and the formulation of Trinitarian belief, Christianity, when it is orthodox, has held to the equal ultimacy of the Three Persons of the Trinity. There could be no subordination of one or more of the Persons of the Trinity below one or more of the other Persons. They were all equally God.

With that in mind, ask this question: Who authored the Old Testament? Answer: God. Now ask a second question: Who authored the New Testament? Answer: God.

Contemporary views of the Old and New Testaments end up opposing the God of the Old Testament against the God of the New Testament. It's as if God the Father wrote the Old Testament, whereas God the Son – the Messiah -- corrected it, or added to it in some manner or form, or made enough changes so that it is no longer necessary to keep the Old Testament laws as they might have been kept in the past.

This perspective, rather than providing a solution to the continuity issues of the Old and New Covenants merely raises a question about God and Christ that was settled formally at the first Nicaean Council.

If the persons of the Godhead are equal and ultimate, then even if God the Father was the divine inspirer of the Old Testament Scriptures, so too was God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. And if God the Son attempted a change at a later time, so too did God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.

And if there really was a replacement to the Old Testament, then why can't there be changes to the New Testament? It does no good to quote Revelation 22:18 to close the door on changes to the New Testament. "I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book." That door was shut centuries earlier when these words were divinely inspired: "You shall not add to the word which I am commanding

you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you” (Deut. 4:2).

The door on the law of God was shut with those words. The Messiah could *not* change the Old Testament law without doing violence to Himself. He would have made Himself a liar. And if He was a liar in relation to Deut. 4:2, He might also be a liar in relation to Rev. 22:18.

There is an alternative, of course. That God is not a liar. That what he said throughout the Old Testament, reiterated in Matt. 5:17ff, repeated by St. Paul in Rom. 3:31, confirmed in Hebrews chapters eight through ten, that the Old and New Covenants tell an identical story.

To deny this is to ultimately deny the Trinitarian formula. It is a denial of the equal ultimacy of the Three Persons of the Godhead, and therefore a denial of the orthodox view of the Trinity handed down at Nicaea in A.D. 325.

#### *Old Testament Promises*

It is fascinating to look at the Old Testament promises about the coming Messiah. Jeremiah 33:14ff clearly indicates that the coming Messiah will execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. But then Jeremiah goes on to say, “For thus says the LORD: ‘David will never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel; nor shall the priests, the Levites, lack a man to offer burnt offerings before Me, to kindle grain offerings, and sacrifice continually’” (vv. 17,18).

Just a little while before these verse, Jeremiah also prophecies,

“Behold the days are coming says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was husband to them, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (Jer. 31:31-33).

This passage is picked up in the New Testament in Hebrews chapter 8 and again in chapter 10, and only serves to reinforce the abiding continuity of the two covenants. The idea of “new” in New Covenant is not something entirely new, not previously in existence. It is the Old Covenant with something that allows it to be “new”, like a new coat of paint on an old barn. But the same structure remains underneath. This unity is described in the words of Robert Webber when he describes the development of Christian liturgy: “While the Old Testament lessons proclaim the prophecy and Matthew describes the fulfillment of the prophecy in Christ, the Epistle declares how the nations of the earth will hear of Christ, the light of the world” (Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Time*, 2004, p. 79).

Jeremiah and the writer of Hebrews agree: the structure underneath is the law of God, which is now to be written on the hearts and minds of God’s people. David will never lack a man to sit on the throne in the house of Israel for the New Israel now has David’s descendent, Jesus Christ, permanently established on the throne. And just as God has kept his promise here, so too the promises of the continuity of the priesthood should be understood with the same assurance.

### *The Challenge of Islam*

Two great faiths have been in battle for over 1,400 years: Islam and Christianity. The battle between these two faiths has been won or lost on the physical battle field with swords and guns.

But there is no intellectual victory for either one. Why?

In at least one important aspect, Islam mirrors a good portion of Christianity, the Old Testament. When Christians insist that the New Testament replaces or supercedes the Old Testament it is in methodological agreement with Islam. Mohammadanism too offers documents that replace or supercede the Old Testament, the Qu’ran.

Thus the intellectual battle between the two faith is one of competing ultimate authority: The New Testament or the Qu’ran.

When you ask, what is the criterion for the elevation of the Qu’ran to ultimate authority, it can only be linked to some mystical experiences of an Arab trouble maker in of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Because of its implicit Arianism, Islam is unable to provide a higher authority than this. New Testament

Christianity, on the other hand, offers “the Spirit” as the ultimate source of authority.

If, on the other hand, both New Testament Christianity *and* Islam are required to accept the Old Testament as the ultimate starting point in religious belief, then both of these faiths disappear.

What takes their place is the authority of the Torah, reinforced in the Writings, with the Prophetic fulfillments pronounced in the Gospels, and some mistaken ideas corrected in the Epistles. The Qu’ran, on the other hand, offers no continuity to the ultimate authority, and like all the false religions of the world, needs to bow the knee to God’s authority as described in the Torah.

### *Conclusion*

The essence of presuppositional thinking is the necessity to get our starting points in the right place. In theological debate today the relative authority of the Old Testament *vis-a-vis* the New Testament is left out of the discussion. It’s time to put it back in.

For this, I thank my Reformed Baptist friend. His difficulty in accepting the Old Testament teaching, even though he knows it is there, highlighted this issue for me.

Of course, it is only a difficulty for those who want to keep on eating the bacon portion of bacon and eggs. But if you are willing to give that up, accept there are some laws in the Old Testament that also need to be rethought in the light of a consistent Biblical authority, then perhaps it will be possible to present a unified authority of God’s word to the world.

In the words of Dr. A.A. Ruler, quoted by my good friend Dr. F.N. Lee, “The Old Testament is the real Bible and the New Testament is an inspired commentary upon it.” As Dr. Lee himself has said, “before creation God determined that His entire special revelation would run from Genesis to Revelation, with Christ and His work in the middle of it. Each freshly-revealed new part of the revelation (e.g. Matt. 1 to Revelation 21) does not delete but expands the previous parts.” That is, it expands our understanding, not the essence of what was said earlier in the Old Testament.

There is an unbroken chain of authority that is consistent in its teaching: The Old Testament, then Jesus, then the disciples and apostles. To claim that one disciple alone, St. Paul, received some kind of divine revelation that allowed him to begin making changes to the Old Testament is not in keeping with the Old Testament and Jesus, and all other disciples and apostles. It is bad exegesis, bad logic, and therefore bad theology to make St. Paul the scapegoat for not keeping the *whole* law of God. For such an argument merely eliminates the authority of large portions of the Bible.

Thus it is necessary to conclude that the New Testament derives its authority from the Old Testament, and any interpretation of it must conform with a correct reading of the Old Testament. This is the *only* choice if we wish to maintain a doctrine of *sola scriptura* and avoid the ancient heresy of Montanism. It is the Bible alone that gives us an *objective* authority, rather than an appeal to *subjectivism* and the apparent work of the Spirit. In fact, it can be seen how the rise of a new Montanism has received help from those who deny the equal authority of the two Testaments. (See *Bach Among the Theologians*, by Jaroslav Pelikan, for some insightful comments on the Pietistic movement and its change in theology from objective to subjective, *Christ for us* to *Christ in us*, pp. 64-65.)

Here's the choice. Equal, or unequal, testaments. There's no middle ground. And in order to have an authoritative Bible, there really is only one choice: Equal authority of *both* testaments because they *both* tell a single story, even though they may not tell it in the same way.

And then let's govern our lifestyles by the consequences of our choice.

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